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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tech hype as a mnemonic process: Misremembering the land problem in India

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Abstract • This research article considers tech hype as a mnemonic process that makes us remember or forget the world, technology, and the myriad ways we can relate to it. The argument is based on an auto-ethnographic vignette and a close reading of two key texts in the discourse on using technology for land management in India. The article shows how technology, the social, and the practice of knowledge-production can be rethought in this mock battle between hype and criticism of hype.

Tech-Hype als Erinnerungsprozess: Falsche Erinnerung an das Landproblem in Indien

Zusammenfassung • *Der Forschungsartikel betrachtet den Tech-Hype als Prozess, der uns an die Welt, die Technologie und die unzähligen Möglichkeiten, wie wir damit umgehen können, erinnert oder sie uns vergessen lässt. Die Argumentation basiert auf einer autoethnografischen Vignette und einer genauen Lektüre zweier Schlüsseltexte im Diskurs über den Einsatz von Technologie für die Landbewirtschaftung in Indien. Der Beitrag zeigt auf, wie Technologie, das Soziale und die Praxis der Wissensproduktion in diesem Scheingefecht zwischen Hype und Kritik am Hype neu gedacht werden können.*

Keywords • *tech hype, mnemonic, blockchain, land rights, India*

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Introduction

The research article moves into the forground what 'hype' and 'criti-hype' do in the context of emerging technologies, and how they serve as a mnemomic process which has influence on how a problem is remembered. The paper contends that both 'hype' and 'criti-hype' are produced within a certain discursive milieu of 'tech-solutionism' as well as the 'counter-(tech) solutionism'. The paper contends that the faux combat between hype and criti-hype not only sidesteps ordinary problems of technology (Vinsel 2021) but also takes attention away from ordinary problems and diverse political imaginaries that have been long in the making.

The paper enacts a critique through a juxtaposition (Pál 2013) of two reports – Blockchain for Property: A roll out road map for India (BFP) (Chandra and Rangaraju 2017) and Recasting land tenure rights in the data epoch (Gurumurthy et al. 2022) (RLT) published by two leading, independent, nonprofit, policy institutes in India – India Institute and IT for Change, respectively. While BFP advocates the use of blockchain and big data for managing property rights in India, RLT critiques such initiatives. The two reports reflect the overall positions of their respective organizations. India Institute defines itself as an evidence-based, free-market policy institute. On the contrary, IT for Change distinguishes itself from both techno-utopic as well as market-fundamentalist approaches to technology.

It should be noted at the outset that these two texts are not unique but symptomatic of the larger discourse on emerging technologies. A critical discussion of these two texts is complemented by the first author's autoethnographic account of working at a privately funded tech policy organization in India from 2021–2022.

The rest of the article is divided into three sections. The section that follows defines hype and foregrounds its mnemonic characteristics. The third section presents the two texts to note how hype and criti-hype are entangled to produce the mnemonic effect. The fourth and concluding section presents an autoethnographic account to situate the ways in which the technology, the social and the knowledge-making practice are reworked in this faux combat between hype and criti-hype.

Situating hype

> *„It's good you are working on these other aspects of blockchain. I am tired of these crypto people and the hype that they have generated."*
> (Quote from the project manager where the first author worked on a project to map the implications of recording land rights on the blockchain in India)

It is commonly agreed upon that Bitcoin emerged in the moment of a 'catastrophic failure' (Bijker and Law 1994, p. 2) – the 2008 financial crisis – as one of the several alternatives to the production, circulation and use of money (Kostakis and Giotitsas 2014). The future of bitcoin, and with it of decentralized crypto coins remains uncertain given the state's monopoly on the production and circulation of money. However, blockchain, the technology underpinning bitcoin, is a strong contender in the redesigning of governance processes (Jun 2018).

The first epigraph is uttered within this milieu – indicating the promise of erasing the catastrophic failure while stabilizing the technology as a non-financial, distributed ledger that can keep tamper-resistant and transparent records. The fascination with cryptocurrencies is identified by the speaker of the first epigraph as *mere* hype and paying scholarly attention to its non-financial use cases is presumed to be more mature and reasonable.

To note the discursive limits inherent in the first epigraph, we can diffract it through Fisher's (2009) description of capitalist realism. That is, to the often-quoted statement that Fisher appropriates, "It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism" (2009, p. 7), one can also add state's monopoly over monetary value to the list. Considering this, according to the first epigraph, studying the non-financial use cases of blockchain is strategic, more practical, mature and grounded because it is *presumably* immature to question the state's monopoly over value.

Hype as a mnemonic process

Scholarly attention to memory has focussed on two things: its relationship to the history of subjectivity and to the technologies of representation (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003). The first deals with the question: what we remember (which makes 'us') while the latter is invested in asking how we remember (the way we are).

To consider hype as a mnemonic process is to foreground how hype constitutes not only the technology or its use but also the socio-political that it intervenes in. Hype makes us remember and forget the world, the technology, and the myriad ways in which we can relate to it. To pay attention to hype as a mnemonic process requires paying keen attention to the way the technology and its place in the world is narrated and "the constitutive role of memory in this process of self-image making or identity formation" (Assmann 2006, p. 67).

Hype as a discursive process and hype a mnemonic process are closely related. While redescribing hype as a discursive device allows us to encapsulate its knowledge claims within the discursive limits, redescribing hype as a mnemonic process foregrounds the narrative structure and its affective reworking of the collective memory across different scales. As a mnemonic process, it co-produces scales from the individual to the various collective and trans-scalar processes. Memory after all is a multi and trans-scalar process which re/descales the social (Erll 2011). Hype and criti-hype – that is, critics who "retain the picture of extraordinary change but focus instead on negative problems and risks" (Vinsel 2021) – can then be situated on the same spectrum of affective reworking of memory – of what *ought* to be remembered and forgotten, and how. This characteristic of hype as a mnemonic process complements recent approaches to hype as a rhetorical device that is not "an inaccurate forecast but rather an expectant kind of language, rhetoric, or discourse" (Smith 2020, p. 502). This allows one to ask not only how hype is produced but also what it is made to do.

Hype makes us remember and forget the world, the technology, and the myriad ways in which we can relate to it.

Land on blockchain: What is being envisioned?

A growing discourse around land and property rights has argued for a formalisation of land records through digitisation to reduce poverty (Sjaastad and Cousins 2009). It is purported to "facilitate the functioning of land markets in developing countries as well as diminish the threat of losing land rights for vulnerable communities" (Daniel and Ifejika Speranza 2020).

This discourse assumes that formalization of land rights and entitlements can lead to better economic growth and development. It argues that people do not lack assets but lack formal recognition of their assets which affects their access to their rights. This claim has been noted to be lacking and a growing body of literature sheds light on its deficiencies (Benjaminsen et al. 2009; Bromley 2009; Meinzen-Dick and Mwangi 2009; Toulmin 2009).

It is amidst this backdrop that formalisation and digitalisation of land and property records have started shifting towards discussions and experiments of land records management on the

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blockchain across various states (Daniel and Ifejika Speranza 2020; Konashevych 2020; Shang and Price 2019; Thamrin et al. 2021; Yapicioglu and Leshinsky 2020).

In India, despite policy-hesitancy concerning cryptocurrency, experiments in blockchain are already underway (MF 2019; MEITG India 2021, MEITG India n.d.; NITI Aayog 2020). These efforts have triggered the interests of both the private and the state actors.

To foreground the misremembering being enacted by the two reports, it would be worthwhile to give a quick note on India's land regime. India's land rights regime and tenure forms are remarkably heterogenous, reflecting the country's diverse cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts which is "normally viewed as a planning and administrative nightmare" (Benjamin 2004, p. 177). The tenure form can rest on several sources such as historical, indigenous conventions, particular sections from the Revenue Act, specific title granting announcements on national days, housing schemes, titles issued by village bodies, city corporation and state level organizations and titles handed down by local royalty (Benjamin 2004, p. 180).

This discourse assumes that formalization of land rights and entitlements can lead to better economic growth and development.

This loose regulatory environment that is premised upon mixed land use is considered to be "the single most important factor that facilitates poor groups access to productive land" (Benjamin, 2004, p. 179). However, the loose regulatory regime is not perceived as conducive for market-led development. In 2008, India's policy on land reforms shifted the "presumptive nature of land records and ownership to that of guaranteed title to land or conclusive land title regime" (Nayak 2021, p. xiv) wherein ownership is guaranteed by the state as opposed to presumptive titling where ownership is assumed unless refuted. This shift is pursued by 'cloaking change in the guise of continuity' by finding innovative ways" via complementary technological and regulatory frameworks (Nayak 2021, p. 11). This policy shift from presumptive to conclusive titling, adopting an apolitical route, becomes a fertile ground for technological solutions such as digitization, GIS mapping and blockchain to flourish.

Situating the two reports: misremembering the land problem

From land rights to blockchain for property rights

BFP was published in 2017 by the India Institute with contributions from authors affiliated with both academia and industry such as the National Law School of India University, Carnegie India, ChromWay Sweden etc. It identified the need for transformations in the legal regime vis-à-vis land ownership, ethical approaches towards big data processing, increased community involvement and improved land digitization. Blockchain is presented as both a "a new trust regime" which would bring "trust, transparency and efficiency in property transactions" (Chandra and Rangaraju 2017, p. 25) and a "disruptive technology, taking the world by storm in a plethora of areas where there was a centralized entity hitherto" (Chandra and Rangaraju 2017, p. 22).

BFP envisions a decentralized governance mechanism that can revamp property governance. It promises to remove corruption by reducing the human point of contact and avoid fraudulent overlapping transfers towards tamper-proof, immutable land records that can directly benefit the state. BFP promises to improve the "security and checks in transactions involving high-value assets such as real estate and property" (Chandra and Rangaraju 2017, p. 6), "centralization of land and property records within the state machinery (which are often in the form of physical ledgers and maps)" (Chandra and Rangaraju 2017, p. 6), improve decision-making, land market price and financialization, and access to clear titles in the case of reparation. Representing state, academic and business interests, it weaves a strong link between introducing blockchain for land management and conclusive titles for ownership.

BFP doesn't invest in *merely* overselling the advantages of blockchain. It is divided into five chapters, a foreword and two case studies. Through this structure, it traverses the risk of tech hype in two ways. First, by downplaying blockchain's challenge to fiat money while upholding its use case for "trade finance and property governance" (Chandra and Rangaraju 2017, p. 25). Second, by foregrounding it as a socio-technical system that will require an entire ecosystem, policy reforms and involvement of host of actors for its success. Its use depends on a robust titling law for conclusive titles, rigorous digitization of existing land records, and an active involvement of local actors such as activists and civil society-based organizations that can translate the vision on-ground. At the same time, the five chapters together work towards redescribing the land problem where access to property is directly linked to improving access to financialization (a claim commonly disputed in the literature) while land disputes are reframed as a symptom of corruption. This misremembering or redescription of the land problem essentially works towards legitimizing the use of blockchain for property rights.

From land rights to data rights: Whither land problem?

One can grasp the faux combat between hype and criti-hype by juxtaposing BFP with RLT. RLT was published in 2022 by IT for Change as a critique of India's Digital India Land

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Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP), the national programme to digitize and modernize land records. The report was a case study conducted in collaboration with FIAN (For the Right to Food & Nutrition) International, a Germany-based human rights organization. RLT notes that DILRMP "continues on the slippery slope of de-recognition of traditional claims of marginal farmers in common property resources noted in the early phases. Most notably, the customary tenure rights of marginal farmers, tribal groups, and indigenous peoples do not find a place in the Program" (Gurumurthy et al. 2022, p. 5).

To present the critique of the programme, RLT poses a series of mnemonic questions: "Digitalization for whom? Towards what? And in whose interests?" (Gurumurthy et al. 2022, p. 12). These questions remain rhetorical in their plea to the policy makers to remember the claims of the marginalized in order to "reclaim the transformative potential of the digital paradigm for tenure rights and farmer empowerment" (Gurumurthy et al. 2022, p. 4). These questions clear the space to demand a "new policy vision for digitalization in agriculture […] in consultation with farmer constituencies […] rather than those of the capitalist market" (Gurumurthy et al. 2022, p. 14).

While we understand the need for a critical appraisal of proposed digitalization policies to make them more robust, we are interested in interrogating the narrative structure via which the critical appraisal is enacted. The "critical judgement" enacted by RLT operates in the mode of "fault-finding" (Williams 2014, p. 84) that relies on exposing a prevailing constellation of power of marginalized farmers and extractive capitalism which has to be tamed through a robust social welfare state. The prevailing logic of "techno-political authority of database welfare regimes" (Gurumurthy et al. 2022, p. 2) is not interrupted or destabilised via this critical judgement. Instead, it enacts a kind of an "inverted contrary affirmation" (Foucault 1996) of the digitalization programme provided that the recommendations made by RLT are taken into account. Against criti-hype we understand critique as that which underscores the contradictions of the discourse, and "brings into relief the very framework of evaluation itself" (Butler 2001). Thus, one can identify in RLT a "bid to change or revitalize politics by bringing the citizen closer to the state or the state closer to the citizen [which] offer the simplest alternative to politics: the simple police" (Rancière 1999, p. 31) i.e., risk-management, regulation and governance.

By enacting a critical appraisal of the DILRMP, RLT forecloses a potential critical relation that can "order the entire field of moral and political judgement" (Butler 2001). Instead, it relies on available configurations where the harms ensuing from data, datafication and use of technology can be mitigated through civil society consultations and a promise of a functional social welfare state, an elusive postcolonial dream (Arora 2020) that can domesticate the market while offering, presumably, a democratic alternative to the technocracy of big tech. It remains unclear how this conclusion is any different from the 'efficiency discourse' of tech-solutionism that is critiqued at the beginning of RLT. The way forward presented by RLT fails to present any challenge to the BFP's 'roll-out plan' that already anticipates RLT's critique and advocates the use of blockchain by weaving a complex web of datafication, blockchain, local actors and CBOs.

RLT's critical appraisal can be described as enacting a governance ecosystem which *merely* envisions a greater role for civil rights-based organizations (CBOs), where CBOs appear as social experts (albeit unelected) speaking on behalf of the most vulnerable. Here, the socio-political problem, the question of democracy and the political is redescribed and misremembered merely as facilitation of politics by the experts. From another perspective, this position can be considered guilty of foreclosing the political.

Epilogue

How not to engage in hype or criti-hype: an autoethnographic account of a failed project

A proposal to study land management on blockchain was submitted by the two authors of this paper to the Nudge Foundation, a non-profit organization based in India that funds solutions to social issues via global philanthropic investment firms and foundations. The proposal was rejected by the jury. At the same time, the first author of this paper was working as a researcher at another tech-policy institute in India. The previously rejected proposal was submitted to the institute by the first author for internal funding and was accepted in July 2022.

The project was not assigned any fixed budget and I [first author] was merely expected to do a critique of existing policy briefs bringing in critical perspectives on the technology and its proposed use for land management. The fieldwork-based method that was proposed in the initial proposal was ignored as 'there was no budget for it'.

I worked on the project for three months and conducted a critical discourse analysis of the white papers which were advocating the use of blockchain for property management. I was asked to write a paper which was to be presented at the donor's property consortium meetings in January 2023 and was informed by the manager that "[the donor] is very excited to know the results and they are looking forward to the paper" (personal communication with the first author).

Due to both personal and professional reasons, however, I resigned in December 2022 without submitting the final report on the project. While other factors had facilitated the decision to resign, I would say, in hindsight, that the inhibition to share the report with the team and the donor emerged from the realisation that the discourse analysis had not revealed anything original and that the paper, if at all, would be merely repeating 'critical perspectives' that, as mentioned previously in the case of RLT, are meant to operate as 'inverted contrary affirmation' (Foucault 1996) of the programmes and technologies being critiqued.

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The auto-ethnographic account above, when refracted through Lee Vinsel's (2021) argument does not only foreground how "innovation speak distracts us from ordinary problems of technology and infrastructure, including maintenance, repair, and mundane labour." The account also distracts scientists from studying ordinary problems, using ordinary tools, and from using research methods that may not always result in operationalizable results or might reconfigure a research problem into a problem that is not in need of the next big tech or a more robust political intervention.

For instance, Benjamin's extended fieldwork-based study of a settlement in South Bangalore presented a "nuanced dynamics of contestations around land" (Benjamin and Raman 2011, p. 26) that allowed him to glimpse local government as a 'porous bureaucracy' (Benjamin 2004), a dynamic which is washed out in straightforward debates over corruption that is "actively promoted by organizations like the World Bank, to limit the influence of local agents" (Benjamin and Raman 2011, p. 26). RLT uses Benjamin (Benjamin et al. 2007) as a citational resource to critique the efficiency paradigm of "techno-development" (Gurumurthy et al. 2022, p. 3). However, RLT's policy recommendations merely complement the efficiency paradigm of BFP as they envision a "a farmer-centric vision of data infrastructure" (Gurumurthy et al. 2022, p. 12). The overall logic of the policy brief forecloses the ordinariness of porous bureaucracy, the 'greyness that surrounds' (Benjamin et al. 2007) claims, local conflicts and contested social relations in favour of an operationalizable tech policy recommendations.

Vinsel (2021) continues to work with a notion of hype as unrealistic claims which are further boosted by the "academic humanities and social science researchers who played along with hype to score cash money and prestige". While we distance ourselves from this meaning of hype that relies on the false dichotomy between projected vs realistic promise, we find the concept useful to note certain trends. A critical reading of BFP and RLT, and the methodological limits narrated via the auto-ethnographic account allowed us to locate both hype and criti-hype on the same spectrum of tech-solutionism. We showed how, as a 'mnemonic process', hype and criti-hype and the faux combat between them rework myriad ordinary social and political problems into tech and regulatory problems. They not only reify the technology but also the socio-political surrounding it while silencing the most affected. Both impinge upon our understanding of the world and how we remember it foreclosing the myriad ways in which we can relate to it. Contrary to this faux combat, it is worthwhile to remember, à la Rancière (1999), policy as policing and to not forget the value of critical work as fantastical, ordinary, unrealistic, immature and without operationalizable implications.

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